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Young Muslim Women's experiences of Islam and Physical Education in Greece and Britain: A Comparative Study.

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**Young Muslim Women's experiences of Islam and Physical Education in Greece
and Britain: A Comparative Study.**

ABSTRACT

Previous research suggests that Muslim women can experience particular problems when taking physical education (PE) lessons, for example with dress codes, mixed-teaching and exercise during Ramadan; and they can face restrictions in extra-curricular activities for cultural and religious reasons. The area is under-researched and there is little evidence of comparative studies that explore similarities and differences in cross-national experiences, which is the aim of this paper. Two studies conducted in Greece and Britain that explored the views of Muslim women on school experiences of physical education are compared. Both studies focused on diaspora communities, Greek Turkish girls and British Asian women, living in predominantly non-Muslim countries. Growing concerns about global divisions between 'Muslims and the West' make this a particularly pertinent study. Qualitative data were collected by interviews with twenty-four Greek Muslim women, and twenty British Muslim women.

Physical education has national curriculum status and a similar rationale in both countries but with different cultures of formality and tradition, which impacted on pupils' experiences. Data suggested that Greek and British groups held positive views towards physical education but were restricted on their participation in extra curricular activities. For the British women religious identity and consciousness of Islamic requirements were more evident than for the Greek women. Differences in stages of acculturation, historical and socio-cultural contexts contributed to less problematic encounters with physical education for Greek Muslims who appeared more closely assimilated into the dominant culture.

RATIONALE

According to the literature, predominantly generated in England, young Muslim women can face particular issues at school during secondary (11 – 18 years) physical education and sports activities as a result of either actual or perceived restrictions placed on them by their culture, sex, religion and ethnicity. It seems that all these factors can be powerful forces that restrict female participation rates (Carroll and Hollinshead 1993, Benn, 2002a). The aim of this interpretive study was to examine similarities and differences in the perceptions of twenty-four Greek and twenty British Muslim women of physical education, school experiences and extra curricular sporting provision.

Islam is the fastest growing religion in the history of the world (F.A.I.R. 2004). Diaspora communities of Muslims are growing in many Western countries, and evidence suggests that Muslim communities and Muslim women in particular, face similar difficulties across national boundaries (Jawad and Benn 2003). As the world confronts increasing challenge in relation to growing media-fuelled islamophobia in the West and a simmering discourse of ‘polarisation of civilisations’ between Islam and the West, it is important to examine the experiences of similar groups in different diaspora communities (Allen and Nielsen 2002, Richardson 2004).

The rationale and value of comparative studies is “... to gain greater awareness and a deeper understanding of social reality in different national contexts” (Hantrais 1996, p2). Thanks to the work of scholars such as Ken Hardman there is a wealth of evidence about the ‘macro’ picture of the ‘promises and realities’ of physical education provision in Europe and world-wide (Hardman and Marshall 2005). There is less cross-national research into ‘micro’ perspectives, lived experiences and realities of students in physical education and sport, which

strengthens the need for the current study (Papaioanou 2000, De Knop 1996). Insight into the experiences of Muslim students in different contexts can contribute to improved knowledge of how complex overlays of religion, gender, culture and ethnicity impact on experience of the subject.

There has been a shift in comparative research towards recognising the importance of interpretative studies provided the societal contexts are acknowledged. The complexities of any cross-national comparative work are acknowledged, because while similarities will exist “... there are also differences and variations based in politico-ideological, socio-cultural, economic values and norms and ecological settings” (Hardman and Marshall 2005, p61). The pursuit is driven by a commitment to the rights of all young people to participation in physical education and sport. In this case the Greek and British backgrounds of the researchers helped with sensitivities towards the linguistic, socio-cultural and institutional contexts that can create obstacles in understanding ‘thought processes, values and ideologies’ when conducting such research (Hantrais 1996, p4, Hantrais and Mangen 1996).

Questions of cultural difference and complexities of multiple identities in the post-modern world, impact on any interpretive comparative study. The Greek and British Muslim women in this study share a global religion, but they exist in distinctive, predominantly non-Muslim countries, where religion and education have developed in different cultural contexts. The dynamic, fluid nature of cultures, influencing and being influenced by the cultures of others, or ‘cultures of hybridity’, are a reality of the modern world and will be influential in this study (Hall 1992, Jenkins 1997). For example, the growth of the Muslim diaspora in Britain is much more recent than in Greece ensuring differences in the inter-relationship of diaspora and host communities. Similarly, increased sophistication of managing

‘intersectionality’ of social identities that moves beyond the simple ‘additive’ discourse of disadvantage is recognised in making sense of, for example, experiences of black, Muslim women in Britain, such as those in this study (Scruton 2001, Benn 2005). Any research in this area needs to remain sensitive to the fact that individuals differentially negotiate their multiple and complex layers of identity. Processes of globalisation and cultural assimilation add to the complexities of the comparative study on experiences of Greek and British Muslim women. The problems of deciphering religious requirements from pseudo religious community practices also add to the challenge of any research in this area.

Islamic culture refers to the lived experience of being a Muslim. ‘The code of living is expressed through Islamic laws laid down in the Shari’ah. These codes imbue Islamic culture, giving meaning to the way in which Muslims make sense of their lives, behave, dress, eat and drink’ (Benn, 1996, p. 6). The all-encompassing nature of Islam is well-described by Mawdudi:

Islam is not a religion in the Western understanding of the word. It is at once a faith and a way of life, a religion and a social order, a doctrine and a code of conduct, a set of values and principles and a social movement to realize them in history.

(Mawdudi, 1989, 12)

It needs to be stated that Muslim females are not an homogeneous group and that there are differences in how they choose to resolve religious and other cultural demands. For example, some choose to adopt the hijab (head-scarf) and Islamic dress, others do not. There is clear evidence that those women who adopt Islamic dress in the West suffer an increase in violence, discrimination, prejudice and exclusion

(Runnymede 1997). This is always exacerbated in backlashes after major terrorist events such as September 11th 2001 in New York and Madrid in 2004 (Allen and Nielsen 2002, Jawad and Benn 2003, Richardson 2004, F.A.I.R. 2004). With growing evidence that Muslim women can face similar problems of disadvantage across the world (Jawad and Benn 2003), gaining insight into the schooling experiences of young Muslim women in Greece and Britain adds another dimension to the limited literature in the area.

ISLAM, GENDER AND PHYSICAL EDUCATION

Research into the experiences of ethnic minority groups has accelerated since the late 1980's. In 1988 Carrington and Williams suggested that Muslim students face difficulties in physical education, and that ethnicity heightens gender differences and shapes different attitudes and beliefs, with girls facing more problems than boys. According to their study, these problems are due to religious and cultural traditions, which assign particular roles to men and women, and contain strict codes controlling behaviour and conduct, thereby restricting access to physical education. Fleming's (1991) study of Asian Muslim youth mentions the low value placed on sports and physical education, and this was supported in De Knop et al's 1996 research into the implications of Islam on Muslim girls' sports participation in Western Europe.

According to Benn (1996), Islam and physical education share some common concerns, the central issue being control of the body, in time and space, in rituals and cleanliness, in dress, in the control of diet and pursuit of a healthy body. Furthermore, both perpetuate gender specific notions of masculinity and femininity, and have been described as male domains in which there has been an imbalance of power between the sexes (Benn, 1996; Scraton, 1993; Ennis, 1998). Tensions between cultural

practices of Islam and physical education have been identified, for example, dress codes for women, mixed / single-sexed groupings, attitudes towards the body related to privacy and modesty, extra curricular activities, Ramadan, swimming and dance activities. The Islamic requirements for modesty and privacy are not met in kit requirements for short skirts, shorts and tee-shirts, public changing and showering situations. After puberty Muslim pupils are supposed to be sex-segregated and many secondary school environments do not permit this. During Ramadan many Muslims fast from sunrise to sunset so energy levels and hydration are risk factors in physical education and sporting activities. Swimming is sometimes problematic because of the mixed-sex public nature of swimming baths, and there is no consensus in Islam about the educational value of some curriculum subjects like dance and music (Carroll and Hollinshead, 1993, Parker-Jenkins 1995, Benn, 1996, 2000a, 2000b, Ansari 2002, McDonald and Hayes 2003). Such tensions can continue into adulthood (Wray 2002, Benn 2003). The recent outcry against the French banning of religious symbols in state schools, and the hijab for Muslim girls in particular, raises awareness of tensions across Europe (Vaisse 2004). Wider global issues have been recognised for some Muslim women wishing to participate in sport at a serious international level (Hargreaves 2000).

The literature reviewed suggests there could be shared experiences for young Muslim women across national boundaries, in relation to tensions at the interface of physical education, sporting activities and Islam. In exploring these issues across British and Greek boundaries the significance of context: historical, geographical, political and educational, will be important in analysis and interpretation. The following studies offer insight into the lived-experiences of young Muslim women

and their encounters with physical education and sporting activities in their secondary schooling years.

METHOD

Although the paper analyses two separate studies, which were conducted independently, there were many similarities that enable the method to be discussed at this point. The two groups shared many characteristics, gender, religion, and membership of ethnic minority groups in predominantly non-Muslim countries. The major weakness in terms of finding purposive homogeneous sampling was that the Greek respondents were still at school (both Greek state and single faith Muslim schools) and aged 13 – 15 years and the British group were at an English University, aged 18 – 21 years of age. The latter group was participating in a larger life history project, which asked them to recall their school physical education experiences. In the context of a comparative study it is not unusual to have to ‘compromise’ on method (Hantaris 1996), and in such a rare research area the authors acknowledge the issue but did not see it as a barrier to the comparative study. It did lead to some interesting outcomes that could lead to further important research in the area. The focus in both sets of interviews was on the perceptions of the young Muslim women of their school-based physical education and sporting activity experiences.

Interviews were seen as the most appropriate investigative tool in order to generate data based on the informants’ own words. Since the study is based within the interpretive paradigm, it is important to formulate a detailed description and explanation of certain phenomena based on the data collected. This would include how people experience their own world, and how they express these experiences.

The interview schedules for both sets of students were similar in their exploration of school-based physical education experiences. Semi-structured interviews allowed space for similarities and differences to be explored. Views on school and the curriculum were explored as well as direct questions about their perceptions of physical education and extra curricular activities. Questions concerning beliefs about religious or cultural factors, and ways in which these did or did not influence participation also formed part of the interviews.

Interviews were tape recorded and transcribed and ‘respondent validation’ was possible for both groups. After coding each transcription the process of identifying common themes started. This process was based on deductive and inductive analytical procedures, which involved scanning the data for categories and relationships among the initial categories, developing working typologies on an examination of initial cases and then modifying and refining them on the bases of subsequent cases. Consequently, new categories emerged as well as sub-divisions in each category (Le Compte et. al, 1994). A detailed description of the students’ responses was shared between researchers to enable similarities and differences to be identified.

A strength was the British and Greek backgrounds of the researchers, which, as already mentioned, helped with sensitivities towards the socio-cultural and linguistic sensitivities required for such research (Hantrais 1996). In terms of significant differences, the researchers do not share the religious identity of respondents, one researcher was male in a female research domain, the other was white in a ‘black’ arena, defined here to include people of South Asian as well as African-Caribbean heritage (Parekh, 2002). There is no consensus in the literature on the positive and negative effects of such differences but the researchers are committed

to removing barriers and striving to improve understanding, judiciously and sensitively (Haw 1996).

STUDY ONE – THE BRITISH MUSLIM EXPERIENCE

The British Muslim context

There are no reliable figures but it is thought there are approximately 1.5 million Muslims in Britain (Ansari 2004). The Muslim ethnic minority group in Britain is a relatively ‘new’ group. Although Muslims have been in the country since the mid nineteenth century the largest migration has been post 1945, predominantly from South Asia, Pakistan and Bangladesh, in response to demand for labour. Many arrived in the 1960’s before legislation curtailed entry. Numbers of Muslims arriving in Britain declined in the 1970’s but have risen in the 1980’s and 1990’s with increased movement of refugees and asylum-seekers (Ansari 2002, 2004). The majority of British Muslims are still of South Asian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi origin.

Richardson (2004) provides mounting evidence of growing islamophobia in Britain that is a fear and intolerance of Islam and Muslim people based on lack of knowledge and understanding about the religion. It is fuelled by the media through reporting of events that links terrorism and fundamentalism to Islam and all Muslims. Back-lash, prejudice and discrimination are particularly vehement against ‘visible Muslims’ who have adopted Islamic dress.

Ansari (2002, 2004) gives examples of vast differences in the ways in which Muslim communities and individuals negotiate their space, cultural practices and identities, with both ‘fission and fusion’ or polarisation and integration occurring simultaneously. It is also interesting to note that the 1980’s saw a resurgence of

interest in ‘real Islam’ amongst young Muslim men and women who attempted to find their own understanding of Islamic texts and interpretations that were meaningful to their current lives. Increasing numbers of British Muslims are choosing to ‘privilege the religious component’ of their identity. The empowering effect of adopting Islamic dress has been part of that trend for some Muslim women.

Education has been recognised as one of the few arenas that have made positive changes in relation to the needs of Muslims (Parker-Jenkins 1995, Ansari 2002) but there are continuing problems with low achievement amongst some Muslim groups and alienation from the education system. Where Islamic religious requirements are not met in schools advice from some sectors of the British community is for the exemption of Muslim children: ‘... head teachers should exempt their Muslim pupils from those areas where they cannot meet the Islamic requirements’ (Sarwar 1994, p14). Physical education is at greater risk than most other subjects in meeting Islamic requirements.

The Physical Education / Sporting Activities Context

Physical education has been part of the formal curriculum for over one hundred years. When England and Wales adopted a National Curriculum for physical education in the early 1990’s it reflected a willingness to improve consistency of provision and to offer a curriculum of ‘entitlement’ through which all pupils had similar experiences and opportunities. (Scotland and Ireland also have a physical education curriculum but these are independent). Emphasis is placed on developing pupils’ physical competence and confidence, skilfulness, creativity and competitiveness, promoting positive attitudes and active and healthy lifestyles (DfEE / QCA 1999). The processes of learning occur through six activity areas: games,

gymnastics, dance, swimming, athletics and outdoor and adventurous activities. Extra curricular provision has a similar long history as part of normal school provision, with variable success, dependent on many factors. Increased centralised government focus on standards in education and extending provision has meant increased funding and control over extra curricular as well as curricular activities in recent years.

The Muslim Physical Education experience

Much of the research into the experiences of Muslim girls and women in England indicates variable practice in relation to accommodating the needs of Muslims. There are very recent signs of positive change. In conjunction with political shifts to a more 'inclusive' society many schools have adopted accommodating policies in physical education. For example, some departments are allowing track suits to be worn, increasing single-sex teaching where appropriate, making showers optional, ensuring new-build facilities have more privacy in changing / showering arrangements, and adapting demands during Ramadan, to engage pupils in less vigorous but valuable ways in the lessons. Most significantly, the growing political sensitivities towards 'inclusion' of marginalised groups, such as Muslim girls, was encompassed in the latest National Curriculum for physical education documentation. This stated that religious and cultural needs of pupils have to be met and examples were given such as accommodation of dress codes, and modifying activities for Muslim pupils who fast during Ramadan (DfEE/QCA 1999).

The indications are that policy and practice are moving in a more liberal and accommodating direction in British education. Change appears to be patchy and the evidence suggests tensions and restrictions on young Muslim women persist. The liberal approach to accommodating religious difference in the British education

system is reflective of a history in which religion (albeit Christianity) underpinned much of the development of education. Increased plurality of the population has meant limited accommodation to religious difference. Approaches in other countries vary. For example in France, which has a secular education system, a law was passed in 2004 to ban all religious symbols, including the hijab (Muslim headscarf). This was seen by many as an affront to human rights and as a discriminatory policy (Vaisse 2004).

STUDY TWO – THE GREEK MUSLIM EXPERIENCE

The twenty-four Greek respondents were from the northern part of Greece, which has the largest Muslim ethnic minority group of Turkish origin in the country. The ethnic community has settled here since the Ottoman occupation. In contrast to the recent diaspora of the British Muslim group the Muslims in Greece are descendants of an occupying ‘elite’, a politically dominating presence which lasted for centuries. The Lausanne treaty in 1923, which facilitated the exchange of Greek and Turkish nationals between the two countries, did not include the Turkish population living in the north part of Greece and the Greek population living in Istanbul. Nowadays the Muslim ethnic minority group represents nearly 30% of the overall population in Northern Greece. They represent working and middle class sections of society, and generally speak Turkish as their first language, whereas the majority population speaks Greek and is Christian Orthodox.

The Muslim community in northern Greece has its own schools, which are single faith (Islam) and the languages of instruction are Greek and Turkish. They follow the same curriculum as Greek State schools for subjects taught in Greek language, and they have their internal curriculum for the subjects taught in the

Turkish language, such as Religious Education, History and Language. However a large number of Muslim children attend Greek State primary and secondary schools, where Greek is the only language of instruction. Physical education is a compulsory subject for all schools and physical education classes are coeducational, with both boys and girls following the same curriculum.

The Physical Education / Sporting Activities Context

In Greece the national curriculum for physical education in secondary schools was introduced in 1990. The aim of physical education is to enhance students' psychological and body strength so that each student reaches his and her full potential regardless of race, gender, religion and culture. Alongside this, physical education contributes to the development of students' personalities and their ability to live a harmonious and creative life (NCPE for Greece, 2001). An additional goal is to introduce students to various aspects of physical education and sports so they learn the value of lifelong participation and the health benefits of being physically active.

The physical education curriculum in Greece covers the teaching of the skills of games such as football, basketball, volleyball, as well as athletics, gymnastics and dance. All physical education classes in secondary schools are co-educational and both genders should be offered the same opportunities and taught the same games and activities (NCPE for Greece, 2001). Extra-curricular activities in Greek schools have a similar long history. They consist of competitive team sports such as football, basketball and volleyball as well as athletics. Each school has its own sports teams and is represented in county and national championships. More importance is given to the competitive aspect of the sport than the holistic value of exercise and physical

activity, which is reflected in the low level of students' involvement in such competitive extra-curricular activities.

Respondents

In Britain the group were predominantly South Asian, sixteen of the twenty respondents described themselves as second generation British Asian Muslims, whose parents had come to England from Pakistan for work between 1950 and 1970. The remaining four students were of Arab or African-Caribbean origin. All were educated in English State schools and were students at one University having recently left school. In Greece the group consisted of all Muslim students of Turkish origin aged 13-15 years, with twelve studying in a Greek State secondary school and the rest in a single faith (Muslim) school in Northern Greece. All respondents were female. Since there were many overlaps in emergent data the results will be presented thematically using the themes of 'perceptions and enjoyment', 'religious requirements and participation' and ' participation in extra curricular activities'.

Results

Perceptions and enjoyment of PE

Most students in the British study had enjoyed physical education and, similarly recognised its value to health and well-being. The happiest memories for the majority were at primary school (4 – 11 years) but this was not true for one:

What I remember really, really hating was having to do it (PE) in my knickers and vest ... I was embarrassed and ashamed because we were brought up with that feeling that you should hide your body ... and there were boys in the class as well ... I had those feelings.

Those British Muslim students who had enjoyed secondary physical education the most were in all-girls schools where some did participate in extra curricular activities such as netball with great pleasure. Some who went through mixed schools had positive experiences as well:

I was the only Muslim in my school, a mixed school, and I was allowed to do whatever I needed to do, I could adapt the uniform. They said they would rather me do PE with jogging bottoms on than not do PE at all so they used to allow that.

Teachers were a powerful influence on the self-concepts of the students and the consciousness of their multiple identities:

... there was a group of us – the Asian students, mostly Muslim, who weren't very good .. we weren't very encouraged in sports ... so many Asian girls are not good at sport."

In the Greek experience Muslim females perceived physical education as an enjoyable subject, where they had fun: 'I love PE, we play games and we have fun with our peers...' Many females stated that physical education was an important lesson that could provide them with healthier and fitter bodies:

In order to have healthy bodies we have to exercise, PE is a means to a healthy and fit body, and due to heavy schedules at school, it is our only hour where we can exercise.... I also think that after all these hours of intensive classes, you can relax by doing PE...

Physical education was seen as a welcome break during school hours and the girls reported that they had a pleasant and enjoyable time:

I like PE, it's not like an ordinary lesson...I like it because I can exercise my body. It gives me the feeling that I am healthy...

The students perceived physical education as an ‘easy’ lesson to participate in, one that could provide them with knowledge about certain activities and body movements as well as about rules and games. Also it was seen as a lesson that did not need any specific preparation at home, and one in which ‘everyone had good grades’.

In contrast, the attitude of one student towards physical education was very negative. Her participation in physical education was limited to twice a term, the minimum required participation according to the school’s policies, for a student to pass the subject:

...I hate PE, I have always hated PE. I get bored...I only participate twice, and always get an absence (on the register) in PE...

This appeared to be related to lesson content and a long history of dislike but it is unclear how that began.

Overall the attitudes of the Muslim students were positive, with recognition of the health benefits of the subject and its ‘difference’ to the rest of the curriculum. There were noticeable ‘conditions’ to the enjoyment of the British students, which related to good and bad inclusive pedagogy and practice, as will be further evidenced in the next section. Enjoyment was linked to success, doing interesting activities in a comfortable environment, with understanding teachers.

Religious requirements and participation in PE

In the British study, where there were some difficulties in secondary physical education experiences that were related to school policies and practices not accommodating the religious requirements of Muslim adolescents. For example, some teachers made no concessions to their strict physical education policy rules to wear a particular kit so the respondents found ‘coping strategies’

like “*pulling our socks up and skirts down to cover our legs.*” Similarly, the issue of needing ‘private’ spaces for changing meant many “*changed in the toilets*” and they found ways of avoiding showers. Tensions with the public nature of swimming baths were encountered, and were exacerbated at Ramadan when some did not want to swim because they were fasting:

... swimming during Ramadan ... my father had to go to the school again to ask for me to be excluded – it was a struggle. I did think sometimes ‘why am I battling with them? They are going to think I am a troublemaker with a problem with everything... but I am not like that, I just want to have what the others have, as well as being Muslim.

Another student articulated her view of teachers’ lack of awareness of their needs: “*I am often surprised at the lack of knowledge that teachers have about Islam and Muslims.*” Others found teachers willing to listen and facilitate changes, which helped the Muslim students to participate. It was the open or closed attitudes of teachers towards Islam and Muslims that contributed to the positive or negative experiences encountered by the Muslim women (Runnymede 1997). Where they met ‘open views’ they found teachers willing to listen and take positive action to help them.

During their adolescent years some of the British Muslim students recalled wanting to adopt the dress code of covering the body, participating only in same-sex groupings, and seeking privacy for changing, but often schools did not make this possible. Reflecting on their experiences in school the students identified adolescence as a phase of growing awareness of Islam and what it meant to be Muslim, within their families, communities and country. They were aware of increasing levels of consciousness of ‘being Muslim’ which impacted on their

ability to participate in physical education. Some had chosen to study Islam to find 'true' meanings for themselves. The issues were not related to a willingness to take part in physical education but to a need for concessions on traditions and systems of organisation that were not conducive to Islamic requirements. As they became more religious the awareness of tensions increased:

I went to a mixed secondary school and it was a nightmare ... I did not take religion seriously then ... it was only when I started becoming interested in religion that I recognised the requirements – around 16 – 17 – before that I'd adopt Islamic dress when I felt like it ... the PE was segregated but it wasn't really because we did it in public spaces...

The growing influence of Islam on life experience is clear in this statement. Awareness of religious expectations on dress, social and behaviour patterns was a gradual process for the women in the study. The lived experience of Islam appeared to be very different for the students in Britain and Greece but whether or not greater religious consciousness would occur in the Greek students as they progressed into adulthood cannot be judged in this paper.

None of the students interviewed in the Greek schools identified any cultural or religious issues that might have prevented them from participating in physical education. In relation to Ramadan some fasted for a month, others intermittently but this did not affect participation in physical education for most students:

...It is a bit difficult to fast and do PE but it's something I learnt to do from an early age and I am used to it now...I enjoy the lesson so much and often I do not have the time to realise I am fasting...

I don't see it as a problem (fasting and participating in PE)...I eat a good breakfast so it keeps me full till the next time I will eat, I might get a bit thirsty but this is not a problem...

Three negative cases mentioned that fasting and doing physical education could be problematic, '*...I think it is (problematic) because you can not be energetic without drinking or eating, but I think that we have got used to it...*'. Some mentioned that to avoid situations where they felt too weak to participate in physical education while fasting they fasted only during the weekends or during the holidays. One respondent explained: '*...well I am not fasting the whole month, just some days, I fast only the days that I do not come to school, that means weekends and holidays....*'

Again the teacher was a significant influence on participation. The Greek students mentioned that their teachers were asking them before each physical education lesson during Ramadan if they wanted to be exempt with no record of absence in the register. As two students mentioned in their interviews:

Our teacher is very understanding in cases where we do not feel fine (due to fasting). They allow us not to participate, however, we participate, as we ought to..... My teachers ask us before the lesson if anyone faces any problem and does not want to participate, if I feel weak I ask for permission not to participate and they allow me without any problem...

Greek students felt that teachers understood their religious and cultural needs. Where the teachers were Muslim themselves (where this occurred they were male Muslim teachers) students recognised more flexible teaching plans with less strenuous and physically demanding activities during the religious festival of Ramadan, which was helpful. In addition they had physical education lessons during the early school hours.

The kit required for physical education was relaxed. Girls wore tracksuit bottoms, leggings and a head scarf if they chose but some stated that they did not wear short skirts since no one was wearing them at school even though they were wearing them at home, indicating the importance of peers and apparently liberal family views on dress.

To summarise, the meeting of religious requirements was more problematic in the British study than the Greek study. Three factors appear to contribute to this, first the patchy awareness amongst British teachers of the religious requirements of Muslims. Second, there was higher consciousness and anxiety about the importance of meeting religious requirements amongst the British students. This could be attributed to the more recent diaspora and identity struggle for some British Muslims in ‘relatively new’ immigrant communities. Third, traditions such as appropriate kit are part of a history of subject pedagogy and practice, which evolved in a more secular society and have only recently been challenged by increasing cultural diversity. Where Greek students did want to pursue a stricter religious lifestyle it appears accommodation to needs was less contentious. It is interesting that the Islamic requirement for single-sex post puberty provision was never raised in the schools used in the Greek study, which were all co-educational, both state and Muslim schools, with mixed-sex physical education. Teacher sensitivity to fasting and vigorous exercise was varied in both studies. The recommendation for recognition of the need for adjustment of activity levels is now enshrined in the National Curriculum (for England and Wales) inclusion statement but that does not mean that it exists everywhere in practice (DfEE / QCA1999, p36).

Participation in Extra Curricular Activities

Some of the Muslim students in Britain were not allowed to attend extra curricular activities and were often resentful of the fact that their brothers were allowed more freedom than they were. It was interesting that in families where a respondent was the eldest daughter, life was often freer for those ‘coming behind’ suggesting a move towards more liberal acceptance of wider community participation with the passage of time.

Not all respondents were similarly affected and this was dependent on their religiosity. There were others in the study who were in families and communities that took a more liberal position towards their Muslim identity in contemporary Britain. For those students there had been no difficulties with participating in school physical education dress codes, mixed-sex lessons and extra curricular activities but they were aware of the difficulties faced by their friends whom they deemed to be ‘more religious than them’. They recognised the increased prejudice and discrimination experienced by their friends because of their ‘Muslim visibility’. This was exemplified by the following comment about relationships within the student-group:

I (a non-hijab wearer) am just Asian to (others), not Muslim. Even though they might be a bit rude towards me they are not as rude as they are to the hijab girls because they'd know I'd answer them back and the hijab girls would be more respectful and dignified.

Similarly in Greece, although students’ attitudes towards physical education were positive, their participation in extra-curricular activities was very limited. Some schools only provided activities for boys. Only one student participated in the school’s basketball team. Most of them expressed lack of interest in extra-curricular activities and the kind of sports provided by the school as the main reason for non-

participation. Some identified heavy schedules in school and failure to pass 'elitist' physical and technical tests to become members of the teams, as the main factors for their lack of participation:

I don't participate. I have heavy schedules and I don't have spare time. Even if I wanted to participate I wouldn't have passed the tests... To enter the teams you have first to pass some physical and technical tests and they pick up those who pass the test with success...

An interesting unexpected issue emerged from the interviews. When asked if they participated in any form of physical activity outside school, some stated that during the weekends they played games with their friends in their neighbourhoods or they were members of local fitness clubs but only when they had completed their homework. These statements indicate that the students preferred a more relaxed way of exercising, for example visiting local fitness clubs or playing informal games with their friends. In contrast to some British students the Greek respondents said they would have no problem getting parental permission to participate in extra-curricular provision but there would be problems if it interfered with 'academic progress', for example:

...They (parents) had some hesitations at the beginning about how I would combine the two (homework and fitness club)...I proved to them that I can combine them successfully and now they don't have a problem...

In summarising the results section, a comparison of responses about physical education and sport experiences from British and Greek students revealed some similarities and some differences. Both groups recalled positive and negative encounters in the subject and extra curricular activities. Experiences were dependent on the attitudes of their immediate community, peers, parents, personal religiosity and

the attitudes and actions of their physical education teachers. The British students recognised that religious consciousness grew during their adolescent years, the younger ages of the Greek respondents made comparisons of this phenomenon impossible but it would make a useful further investigation. The change in religiosity brought both empowerment as Islamic identity strengthened, and new tensions, for example in physical education where Islamic requirements were not met. The British students were quick to point out the differences and confusions between religious requirements and cultural practices, where some community restrictions were often 'un-Islamic' and wrongly used to prevent their participation in wider opportunities.

The Greek respondents did not see religious or cultural barriers to participation in curriculum time although there were some institutional restrictions on their extra curricular participation related to gender biased provision or unattractive activities. All pupils recognised the importance of their teachers' attitudes, beliefs, empathy and understanding that could make the difference between positive or negative experiences in physical education.

DISCUSSION

Greek and British principles underpinning the subject of physical education and its contribution to the development and welfare of children were similar. Culturally the subject was less formal in Greece with more relaxed dress codes, and varying degrees of implementation, for example provision in the Greek schools enabled one student to participate in just two lessons a term which met the minimal criteria to 'pass' in the subject in that school. The recommendation and aspiration in all English State schools is for a minimum of two hours provision per week for every pupil.

In the Greek and British experience most Muslim students perceived physical education as an enjoyable subject, where they had fun. Cothran (et. al, 1998), identified 'fun' as an instrumental goal, a means of attaining other valued goals of students' engagement and compliance and this was seen as the key reason for students' participation.

There were differences in the ways in which religion impacted on experiences in physical education which is attributable to the different socio-historical contexts of the long established Greek Muslim population compared to the relatively recent growth in British Muslims. The Greek students suggested that their religion and culture did not have any affect on their participation in physical education classes, even during the religious festival of Ramadan. The English students recognised growing awareness of Islamic requirements for modesty, dress codes and single-sex environments during their adolescence, and some experienced tensions in physical education when some teachers' traditionalist approaches to the subject appeared inflexible and lacking in understanding of Islamic requirements. Most of the British students experienced increasing religiosity during adolescence that exacerbated tensions where religious requirements could not be met.

It is interesting that the Greek schools and physical education lessons were co-educational, and the physical education teachers were male. These factors did not cause concern for the young Greek Muslim women or their families. This indicates a more liberal and integrated, modernist interpretation of being Muslim in the Greek context, which contrasted with a greater struggle to retain distinctiveness, religious and cultural values for many of the British Muslims. Such factors are complex and related to different histories of arrival and integration of diaspora communities in the host country, its politics, laws and institutions. The relatively recent success of British

Muslim communities in having their rights acknowledged, and in developing their own institutions, including Muslim schools, have only occurred since the 1980's. This was a period that saw a reawakening of interest amongst young second generation British Muslims, in Islam and their Islamic heritage (Ansari 2004). The distinctiveness of diaspora communities and their histories in different countries requires further research to improve understanding of similarities and differences in the Muslim experience across national boundaries.

The Greek teachers were more empathetic to the religious and cultural needs of those young Muslim students who did adhere to practices such as fasting. Some teachers made allowances and changed teaching plans to accommodate their needs. Carroll (1993) and Carroll et al (1993) suggested British students' perceptions of their teachers' understanding of Muslim culture were negative. There was more ignorance on the part of some British teachers in the current study and 'closed' views of Islam which were unhelpful (Runnymede 1997, Richardson 2004). Some Muslim respondents had met informed, empathetic teachers with open views of Islam (ibid). The direction of current policy and practice from government informs National Curriculum legislation that provides teachers with clear statements to meet the religious and cultural requirements of pupils in physical education, as part of a stronger policy of inclusion (DFEE/QCA 1999). Such action would include allowing pupils to wear track-suits that cover arms and legs, reducing activity demands during Ramadan and being sensitive over gender groupings and issues of privacy.

Although both Greek and British students' attitudes towards physical education were positive their recorded participation in extra-curricular activities was very limited. For the Greek students no religious or cultural factors were mentioned as reasons for non-participation. The British respondents mentioned cultural rather

than religious barriers to their participation, particularly in relation to their gender. This supports the findings from Carroll's (1993) research in which students mentioned cultural reasons as factors for non-participation in extra-curricular activities, for example 'girls being needed in the home to help with jobs.' Shropshire (et. al, 1997) suggested that the perceived lack of importance of physical education and sporting extra-curricular activities in comparison to other assessed subjects could also result in low participation rates in extra-curricular activities. This accentuates the importance of curriculum opportunities in physical education as the only route for many Muslim girls to have access to exercise (De Knop et al 1996).

Some Greek schools lacked extra-curricular activities for girls. The reason, according to the physical education teachers, was lack of sports facilities. In one case the head teacher maintained that the creation of extra-curricular activities was school policy but conceded it depended on the teacher's commitment. Siraj-Blatchford (1993) maintained that school policies in British secondary schools could exclude Muslim girls from extra-curricular activities, for example where access is restricted through type of activity, gender grouping or prohibitive timing of provision.

Although there were many compatible facets to comparing these two case studies the age differences of the groups, one group being 'in-school' and the other 'in University reflecting on school' was not ideal. It did illuminate a key factor that is worthy of further research. The process of 'religiosity' or gradual assumption of stronger religious beliefs and values, happened slowly during the years of adolescence. As adults the British students were able to reflect with maturity and 'hindsight' on changes in their identity and ways in which they coped with these during their education. It would be interesting to explore whether older Greek Muslim women experienced the same transformation in their adolescent years.

CONCLUSION

The two groups of students shared much in their physical education experiences. The subject of physical education has National Curriculum status in both countries, with similar rationales, but different cultures and traditions that shape attitudes and values of participants. Students had both positive and negative experiences of the subject. The less formal approach indicated in the Greek pupils' experiences could contribute to the less problematic experiences encountered. Although linked by their Muslim identities, differences in the Greek and British experiences are attributed to the different historical and socio-cultural contexts of the groups. The British students were more conscious of the potential tensions at the interface of Islam and the subject.

Historical differences and stages of acculturation for diaspora Muslim communities in the two countries help to explain contrasts in the lived experience of Islam. British Muslims are predominately part of a post 1960's pattern of economic migration from Pakistan and Bangladesh, striving to find ways to keep their culture and religion alive and find a sense of belonging in British society. Ensuring they uphold Islamic requirements of dress and behaviour is important to many, as is challenging systems that hinder their struggle for respect of differences, for example the right to have Muslim schools. They are living through a period of 'revivalist' interest in Islam, which is not the same as the global terrorism conducted in the name of Islam. Turkish Muslims are descendants of Ottoman conquerors who have lived in Greece for over 300 years and have a different experience of Islam. This might be described as modernist, assimilating more of the cultures and expectations around them, for example finding mixed-sex physical education in State and Muslim schools unproblematic.

The difference in ages of the respondents in both studies could also account for the less problematic Greek experience. Adolescence is a key period of identity transformation for Muslim women as Islamic requirements and responsibilities which shape their dress, interactions and behaviour become important in the lives of those who choose to move in a more religious direction. Individuals will negotiate this transformation in relation to many factors such as their own views on being Muslim in a non-Muslim country, and the influence of family, community and peers. What they learn from the education process is also crucial in shaping the transformation. The empathy between Islam and physical education, in the pursuit of a healthy body, is a positive factor that should underpin policies of inclusion that enable Muslim pupils to participate and experience the benefits of physical activity which they can sustain throughout their lives. The religious needs of Muslim women can be met by education and sporting institutions and should not be a barrier to participation in such an important and beneficial area of life.

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